Chicago Tribune, Tuesday, December 26, 1978

Guyana tragedy puts lawyer Lane back in the limelight

By Rogers Worthington

MEMPHIS — The lights are burning, the television cameras are moving in, and an owlish-eyed, bearded, and well-coiffed Mark Lane, 51, is coming across amazingly buoyant for a man who only a few weeks before survived one of the most mind-numbing catastrophes in modern history.

It is 9 a.m. and Lane is starting a busy Saturday with a television panel show about the death orgy in Jonestown. After that is lunch with several newsmen and another taping session; this one a segment for a French television show. The rest of the day will be consumed by phone calls and a procession of reporters to his modest house on Memphis' south side.

This is the way life is for Mark Lane since returning from Guyana last month. He and fellow attorney Charles Garry represented the Rev. Jim Jones during the tragic visit to Jonestown, Guyana by Rep. Leo Ryan (D., Cal.). While Ryan and four others were being gunned down by Jones' minions at the tiny Port Kaituma airstrip 8 miles away, Lane says he and Garry were being held captive on the edge of Jonestown. And while members of the jungle commune lay dead or convulsing from potassium cyanide poisoning, Lane and Garry were escaping through the bush.

THE REASONS for the buoyant spirit that has characterized him much of the time since his return are, like many things about Mark Lane, complex and contradictory. He is, understandably, almost giddy at having survived, and at the same time at having been one of the few witnesses to the final living hours of Jonestown.

In a macabre way, it is unbelievable good fortune for Lane, whose involvement in most of the events he writes and lectures about is usually after the fact.

Within a week of returning Lane already was considering how best to capitalize on his unique access to the Jonestown story. He has dropped his former lecture agents and signed up with New Line Cinema, an aggressive firm that has already booked him for more than 30 lectures in the next 3½ months at between $2,500 and $3,000 each.

The Los Angeles Times Syndicate is reportedly getting $40,000 from European magazines for a series of five Lane-written articles. He got a healthy slice of the syndicated TV panel show produced in Memphis and syndicated in several cities across the country. And Lisa Collier, his New York agent, is talking to publishers about a book she expects will command $100,000. She's talking with filmmakers and television producers about a docu-drama as well.

AND LANE is back in action in one of his favorite roles: the embattled activist lawyer fending off, attacking, and flirting with the press; lambasting the government and its intelligence agencies; traveling about, expressing righteous indignation, and defending the now dim and compromised cause he once saw in Jonestown.

All the while, his name continues to crop up in connection with Jonestown. "Lane Admits He Knew of Cult's Oppression," "Lane Sees 'Master Plan' by Cult for Political Murders," "Mark Lane Fears He Is in Danger Because of Connection With Cult."

One story, proved wrong, had him seeking immunity for himself as well as his client, former top Jones aide Terri Buford. Another story had him and Buford in Switzerland two weeks ago at the same time some Peoples Temple numbered bank accounts were supposedly emptied.

Copyright © Gregory Robinson

Mark Lane and fellow attorney Charles Garry (right) talk with cult leader Jim Jones the day before the Guyana killings. Jones had a nervous trait of rubbing his face with his hand when he became tense, as he does here. (This picture was taken by San Francisco photographer Gregory Robinson, who was killed in the airport shooting the next day.)

NEWSPAPER COLUMNISTS who have never considered Mark Lane their favorite guy dropped usually tempered tones to give him a once-and-for-all word lashing. Jimmy Breslin admitted to despising him. Nick Thimmesch called him a "vulture," and the usually measured Anthony Lewis of the New York Times (not Mark Lane's favorite newspaper) called him a "ghoul" whom "it is time for the decent people of the United States to tune out," and suggested newspaper editors and television producers seriously consider blackballing him.

Through it all is the tantalizing hint that Lane knows still more than he is willing to tell. Indeed, there are moments when events connected to Jonestown and the Peoples Temple seem to revolve around Mark Lane.

On one hand he obviously mourns the needless loss of so many lives, and on the other hand he appears to be having the time of his life. He is wary, titillated, cautious, voluble, exhilarated, exhausted, suspicious, indignant, excited, fearful, outraged, ebul-

Continued on page 2

Guyana tragedy puts Mark Lane back in limelight

Continued from 1st Tempo page

lient . . . it is almost too much for one person.

MARK LANE'S connection with Jonestown and Peoples Temple comes in the autumn years of a lifelong career of championing causes that interest him. He grew up a bright but shy youth in the pleasant, middle-class Jewish neighborhood of Flatbush in Brooklyn with an older brother and a younger sister, the children of a certified public accountant who had the family name changed from Levin to Lane.

After high school and a tour of duty with the Army in postwar Europe, Lane came home uncertain of what to do with his life. An aptitude test narrowed the choice to law or journalism. He opted for law.

In the following years Lane has spent much of his time championing causes that have identified him with both the Old and the New Left. He tried to save the Rosenbergs, campaigned against the House of Un-American Activities Committee, worked for reform of New York's Democratic Party, and accused attendants at New York State homes for the mentally retarded of brutalizing young patients.

WHEN LANE wasn't fighting for causes, he was practicing law on Manhattan's Upper East Side. "My memory of him back then," recalls singer Martha Schlamme, the second of Lane's three wives, "was that he was imbued with the will to change the world. His heart bled for the people. Unfortunately it didn't bleed enough for me."

But former law partner Seymour Ostrow said Lane's passion for the people lasted only as long as the media attention on the case he was working on. "I'd end up handling the work after he squeezed all the newsworthiness out of it," said Ostrow, who did not part with Lane on friendly terms.

After a tumultuous two-year term in the New York State Assembly, Lane sought a congressional seat in 1961. But not before getting himself arrested as a Freedom rider trying to integrate a Mississippi restroom, one of 16 times, Lane says, he has been arrested while pursuing a cause.

HIS RACE for Congress was run aground by disclosure of $415 in unpaid parking tickets. His sister Ann, who worked on the campaign, said it was probably she and other campaign workers using Lane's car who got the tickets.

But if the scofflaw image wasn't enough, rumors of some exotic photographs of a *menage a trois* supposedly starring Lane with two prostitutes, was. Except for a mock run at the presidency with Dick Gregory in 1968, that ended his career in electorial politics.

But Lane soon found a new career. His was one of the earliest and loudest voices to protest the conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin of John F. Kennedy in 1963.

A legal brief he wrote in defense of Oswald caught the eye of a New York editor who encouraged him to turn it into a book. "Rush To Judgment" was the third book to challenge the Warren Commission's conclusions. But it was the best-selling one, and however much it was criticized, as with Lane himself, the one to do the most to incite public interest in a re-examination of the assassination.

LANE HAS produced five other books, including "Code Name Zorro," (with Dick Gregory) about the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He has given hundreds of lectures on both assassinations, coproduced a documentary based on "Rush To Judgment," and co-written a feature movie, "Executive Action," with old friend Donald Freed, that theorized that munitions makers were behind Kennedy's murder.

Throughout the '60s and '70s Lane was a vocal opponent of the war in Viet Nam. He spent two years near Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho encouraging South Vietnamese pilots and American GIs to defect or ask for conscientious objector status.

When leaders of the American Indian Movement occupied Wounded Knee, Lane moved to South Dakota to work on the Wounded Knee Legal Offense-Defense Committee. His most recent efforts are to win a jury trial for James Earl Ray and open a deeper probe into the King assassination.

Friends know Lane as a gourmet cook, a lover of plants, and a passoniate worker whose entire life revolves around his current cause.

"There's just no difference between night and day for him," said sister Ann Lane, a historian who spent her summer vacation with him this year in California. "He works all the time. He goes at an incredible pace. His life is not normal. His rhythms aren't like the rest of ours."

LANE'S FIRST awareness of Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple came last summer through his old friend and coworker Ronald Freed.

Charles Garry had given Freed's name to Jones as a writer who would produce a sympathetic chronicle of the Jonestown experiment. Freed spent two weeks in Jonestown and on his return communicated his enthusiasm for the commune as an incipient socialist Utopia to his old friend Lane. Freed also mentioned Lane to Jones as just the man to conduct a counteroffensive against what Jones said was a government conspiracy against him.

At Jones' invitation, Lane traveled to Guyana in September and spent two days at the jungle commune, where he learned just how far from religion the Peoples Temple had come. At his first dinner in Jonestown, he sat at the table waiting for someone to say grace before picking up his fork. "Are you waiting for grace?" he recalls Jones asking. "OK everybody," Jones said, "What do we say about grace?" The reply came in unison and Lane was stunned by it: "F____ God."

TWO DAYS was also sufficient time for Lane to tell a reporter for the Georgetown Chronicle that "I have concluded that there is a conspiracy to destroy the Peoples Temple, Jonestown, and Jim Jones." Lane added that his conclusions were the result of "the first international investigation" done by the Citizens Committee of Inquiry, his long-standing organization, to keep up interest in the Kennedy assassination.

Lane told the reporter he had come to Guyana "specifically to investigate allegations made in San Francisco against Bishop Jones and the Peoples Temple."

'There's just no difference between night and day for him,' Ann Lane says of her brother Mark. 'He works all the time. He goes at an incredible pace. His life is not normal. His rhythms aren't like the rest of ours.'

"There has been wide publicity in San Francisco about the allegations and I have read the charges thoroughly," Lane is quoted as saying. "I found no foundation in these charges." He said he would complete a report in 60 to 90 days, and that meanwhile he had recommended civil action be taken against "agencies in the United States."

BUT IF Lane could give Jonestown a clean bill of health after a two-day visit, he was soon to meet someone who would provide him with some shattering insights beyond the surface appearance of life at the commune. She is Terri Buford, and Lane met her while leaving Jonestown in September. At 26, Buford had been with Peoples Temple virtually her entire adult life.

A thin, pale woman with perpetually frightened eyes, Buford was counted among those most loyal to Jones. But weary of the rigors of life at the commune, she had asked to be transferred to the temple office in San Francisco.

A month later she defected and placed herself in Lane's hands. Lane later told a reporter in early December that before the Ryan trip Buford had revealed to him the plans for mass suicide, the stockpile of guns, and the use of drugs to keep members enslaved.

Now, several weeks later on the Memphis television show, he is remembering some of that, and trying to forget some of it too.

"THAT SEGMENT of the media that is very responsive to intelligence organizations tried to focus the blame on me for Congressman Ryan's visit there," he says at machine gun speed in a tone that manages to be both indignant and pleasant at the same time. "Yet I remain the only person in the entire world who begged Congressman Ryan not to go. I also at that time was a lot less informed of the problems down there than others."

It is practically the first thing out of his mouth on the show, and it is the kind of statement that has endeared Lane to so many journalists trying to separate fact from self-serving hyperbole. Congressman Ryan probably knew almost as much as Lane. He was briefed by former Jonestown residents Deborah Layton Blakey and Grace Stoen in Washington Nov. 13. Blakey had defected from Jonestown early last summer and was in a position to know almost as much as Buford. Still, Jones had deteriorated considerably in the late summer and fall, and Buford was in a far better position to know his most recent state of mind.

LANE'S CLAIM that he begged Ryan not to go has little backing. "Leo never talked to Mark Lane," said Joe Holsinger, a top aide on Ryan's staff. "There was absolutely no warning of any problem down there from Lane. Any indication he tried to save them from their fate is totally false."

Lane did try to reach Ryan, and instead was referred to an attorney for the House Foreign Affairs Committee who doesn't recall any pleading on Lane's part.

One newspaper account quotes him as knowing of tranquilizer-seasoned grilled cheese sandwiches in the Jonestown dining room and not warning anyone. Lane has called the writer of that article — whom he tried to single out for favored treatment in Jonestown — a liar, and told another reporter he never was offered a cheese sandwich and never would have suspected they contained drugs.

He contends that those news organizations that either misquote him or show him in an unfavorable light are "very responsive to intelligence organizations." Lane can point to a Freedom of Information Act claim he had the ACLU file with the FBI several years ago as producing good reason for that belief. The results, according to an account in the Baltimore News-American, revealed that Lane and other critics of the Warren Report had been under surveillance by the FBI and were the objects of attempts by federal agencies to discredit them.

IF IT HAPPENED once it can happen again, reasons Lane. "Everyone in the news media is willing to say it happened 15 years ago, 10 years ago, but not today," he said. "Ten years from now they'll be willing to say it happened today."

Lane's image in the media, with or without help, is as someone who profits from tragedy, although friends say he pumps whatever money he makes back into the causes he is working on. His only self-indulgence is fashionable clothes, says 20-year friend and lecture agent Pat Pomerantz, who recalls signing over a Lane lecture check to the Wounded Knee Legal Offense-Defense Committee.

"Vincent Bugliosi wrote and lectured about the Manson murders. F. Lee Bailey and Louis Nizer have both written books and lectured about criminal cases they've been involved in. What's the difference between these people and Mark?" Pomerantz said.

When his critics accuse him of profiting from tragedy, Lane points to the quickie books on the Jonestown tragedy produced by the Washington Post and San Francisco Chronicle reporters who were there. "Why isn't anyone saying that they're profiteering off tragedy?" he said.

Lane also has been faulted for his apparent love of publicity, a tendency that at times causes him to speak before he thinks. "I think public relations-wise he handled the Guyana thing very badly," said longtome friend Dick Gregory.

"The longer he was back from Guyana, the more things he talked about. That didn't help any."

BUT A CONSIDERABLE factor behind his image is the image makers themselves, the press, and their attempts to deal with Lane's often excitable, cavalier, and occasionally fanciful use of language. "Lawyers are usually very careful with words," said Chicago Tribune Atlanta correspondent Tim McNulty, who has covered Lane at press conferences both in Guyana and Tennessee. "But he cares more for the impact than the truth of those words. For anybody who spends his working days trying to get at truth and then comes up against Mark Lane's statements, it is a weird juxtaposition. You get fretful that someone is going to believe everything he says. And what if something he says is true? Who's going to be able to pick it out?"

Such feelings have created a credibility problem for Lane with reporters, whether they have had any direct experience with him or not. And that credibility problem, say some newsmen, can create a negative bias.

"If you do a story about Lane, you feel obliged to put something in to knock him," said CBS correspondent Bill Stout, who has covered Lane on and off since 1963. "You sneer at him while you tell what he has to say. If you don't do that editors, producers and readers will get all uptight. To prove we're not gullible, we dump on him each time we deal with him."

YET IN THE meantime, whether they like it or not, the weight of history is pushing many Americans toward the Lane position on some issues. Millions of Americans are drawn to theories of assasination conspiracy. And revelations by the Church committee have given credibility to charges of manipulation of people and events by federal intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

But somehow when Lane utters such charges today, as is often his wont, the credibility goes awash. The early bird of conspiracy theories can ruminate about Peoples Temple hit lists and secret assassination squads, and say things like "there is a force at work. . . ." It's, ironically, the same phrase used by a now-dead Jonestown resident in describing to a Washington Post reporter the problems of the Peoples Temple: ". . . some force is working to disrupt and agitate. . . ."

It is all swirling about Mark Lane, who is counsel, witness, and participant, and there are times when it just may be too much.

"I feel at this point there's no place to go to," he said. "I feel like the guy Robert Redford played in 'Three Days of the Condor,' at the end, that there's no place for good guys to go."

Chicago Tribune Press Service